

WELFARE, DEMOCRACY, AND THE NEW DEAL

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 1988

Reprinted 1993

First paperback edition 2002

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 521 33379 2 hardback

ISBN 0 521 52116 5 paperback

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INTRODUCTION

The focus of this book is narrow but its implications are wide. Public welfare, the latest born of government services, raises deep questions about the nature of society. Who should be given help, how, and at whose expense? Should welfare go beyond minimal aid to destitute people? Should rehabilitation, retraining, and environmental control be added to the list? Should the benefits be extended to people who are far from being destitute? And what obligations have people who support themselves for the well-being of those who do not?

Mass unemployment in advanced societies puts an edge on these questions. The unemployed suffer distress when others, over whom they have no control, fail to provide work. This situation may be attributed to international dislocation, ill-conceived national policy, or miscalculation by business leaders. As economists are seldom able to agree on the distribution of blame, the obligations of society are not easy to determine.

Whatever the theoretical problems, most national governments accept responsibility and meet the cost from taxes, to which the rich must contribute a high proportion of their income. In the United States, during the Great Depression, it was difficult to arrive at this solution because public responsibility was divided by the U. S. Constitution and further subdivided by state constitutions, and because the redistribution of wealth by fiscal policy had always been resisted. What was required was not the enlargement of existing public commitments and an increase in taxes, but fundamental changes in concepts of social obligation and government power.

The debate over poverty was not new and men continued to argue over the weight to be given to individual failings or environmental causes. The traditional attitude had been to blame able-bodied people who could not help themselves but to accept a communal obligation

to prevent them from dying of starvation. A distinction had always been made between paupers who were capable of work and people who were destitute because they were physically disabled, mentally incapable, or too young to work. Special programs had been set up by the states to care for people in these categories, but relief for persons outside them remained exclusively a local responsibility. This included the relief of able-bodied persons who were willing to work but could not find employment. To those for whom the states accepted responsibility there had recently been added aid for mothers with dependent children and no wage earner in the family. Some states had taken the first steps toward statutory assistance in their own homes for old people without means of support, though there was still a prevalent feeling that old people who had suffered unforeseen misfortune were best helped by private charity, but that those who had been improvident should go to the poorhouse.

The 1920s saw decided advances in institutional care, welfare administration, and social work methods. Competent observers were moderately optimistic about the future and believed that the country was set on a course of improvement in humane treatment of the unfortunate. Wise administration of public and private charity would greatly reduce, if not eliminate, avoidable destitution. If accident, illness, and unemployment could not be avoided, there would be continued improvement in bringing aid to the victims. Much was expected from organized charities, but public welfare, especially in the cities, was growing out of its primary task of relieving derelict humanity to investigate the causes of poverty and experiment with rehabilitation.

In spite of this progress America was less prepared than any other advanced country to tackle the consequences of a major depression. There was no social insurance; the federal government accepted no welfare responsibilities except for veterans; state responsibility was limited to well-defined categories; and small local governments carried the full burden of relief for the unemployed. Private charities were prepared to do as much as they could, but though their success was confidently predicted, voluntary organizations designed to help individuals and improve communal facilities could not cope with mass unemployment.

The crisis called for rapid improvisation, but ideas long regarded as taproots of American character were not easily abandoned. "Local responsibility" might be an empty slogan when so many local govern-

ments faced bankruptcy, but it was defended to the last. Public men with great experience continued to believe that private charities would meet the challenge even when their funds were running out and fund-raising campaigns no longer met their targets. In states the favorite financial expedient was to raise the ceiling on the borrowing power of local governments – thus pushing them still more deeply into debt – rather than to raise taxes to meet increasing costs.

The way in which the crisis developed, the actions taken in the worst-hit states, and the reluctant move toward federal relief are described in the third and fourth chapters of this book. At this stage it is necessary only to point out that the men and women who would have to administer the new policies, staff the new state and federal agencies, and bear the heat of the day as field representatives were drawn from a new profession. Social work had been advancing, and at its head were directors and executive officers of large charities and community chests, state welfare commissioners, and welfare directors of some large cities. There were also a few academics from the new schools of social work, which had trained most of the rank-and-file social workers (of whom many were young and a majority were women).

When relief became big government, these welfare administrators and social workers were the available experts who suddenly found themselves in positions from which they could plan policy and implement it according to professional precepts. Inevitably some mistakes were made. The methods of professional social work had been taught with a view to helping maladjusted individuals and were not wholly suitable to deal with mass destitution in a maladjusted society. Nevertheless many were willing to learn, and by good fortune there were individuals of outstanding ability at the top.

The administrators and social workers who managed emergency relief at state and national levels were a new breed in the corridors of power. They were middle class and college educated, but not from socially prominent families. They were not professional politicians, lawyers who had worked their way up the political ladder, or representatives of business interests. Their only qualification was professional competence in a field carrying little social status.

There was no precedent for federal relief. It meant that federal money was spent as never before and that professional social workers exercised surveillance over matters that had always been sheltered

from scrutiny by state rights and local responsibility. The men in the lead had fairly clear ideas about the kind of change they wished to introduce, and under the banner of federal relief men dedicated to reform had a unique opportunity to introduce a new era in welfare policy.

The experiment planted in their minds the idea of a permanent, professional, and national welfare system. They argued that the facts revealed by the emergency would always exist, that the fundamental causes were nationwide, and that only the national government could supply, organize, and supervise the remedies. This dream was not to be realized in full – to the continued regret of most experts in the field – but it generated the whole modern system of social security and federal attacks on poverty.

As the federal and state relief administrators set about their tasks, the most serious impediments were presented by locally elected officials, state legislators, and some governors. The people dedicated to improvement were placed squarely in opposition to those who depended on popular choice. The first shock of mass unemployment persuaded many people that something had to be done, and there was an initial welcome for those who did it. But, as they became accustomed to the new conditions, elected officials came to resent the authority given to relief directors, and majorities in most state legislatures fought long, hard, and usually with success to avoid paying their share of relief costs. There may be lessons in this for those who talk today of the need for community politics.

Is it possible to extract from this experience a general theory to explain the expansion of public welfare? In an influential book¹ Piven and Cloward argue that “expansive relief policies are designed to mute civil disorder, and restrictive ones to reinforce work norms” and that “the historical pattern is clearly not one of progressive liberalization; it is rather a record of periodically expanding and contracting relief rolls as the system performs its two main functions: maintaining civil order and enforcing work.” They accuse other writers of viewing the system as “shaped by morality” and as obscuring “the central role of relief agencies in the regulation of marginal labor and in the maintenance of civil order.”

¹ Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare* (New York, 1971), xiii–xvii.

It is easy to select evidence to support this hypothesis. In times of economic depression there is bound to be talk of civil disorder, but it does not follow that threats of violence are the only or even the principal incentives for extending welfare. When action to combat distress is urgently needed, the possibility of violent unrest is an obvious argument to support the case for immediate relief; but it is possible to fill pages with accounts of other arguments that rely on pictures of misery, appeals to humanitarian sentiment, and stories of demoralization. On balance, a bread line was a more persuasive argument than a riot.

The following chapters include several references to threatened violence and attempts to organize the unemployed; but there is also evidence of docility, demoralization, and apathy. Communists and others tried to make the most of the opportunity, but the surprising fact is their lack of success. The most that can be said of violence as a factor in relief policy is that it may, on a few occasions, have accelerated action on lines that had already been decided. The lines themselves demand a rather different explanation.

There is no need to place too much faith in the good will of governments. Men who govern are not free agents and operate within parameters set by the culture in which they live, and the moving force in modern culture has been the scientific revelation that problems can be solved and evils prevented. This was the faith that inspired the men and women who worked on the frontiers of social welfare, and the depression allowed them to put their ideas into action on a grander scale than was ever before thought possible. It is not necessary to "view the system as shaped by morality" to believe that ideas are stronger than interests. Society changes as the result of unremitting effort and occasional opportunism on the part of minorities who start out with a hope that it can be improved. They may be moralists, scientists, utopian enthusiasts, or cool pragmatists, but all share the conviction that life can be improved by rational action.

This does not mean that those who are affected by change have no influence upon its character. As Michael Katz argues, the poor have done more on their own behalf by adaptation than by threats. "In every era the poor have created strategies of survival whose resourcefulness belies the image of passive degradation with which poor people are often portrayed."²

² Michael B. Katz, *Poverty and Policy in American History* (New York, 1983), 241.

Evidence for “strategies of survival” during the Great Depression is abundant, but this book is concerned with the formulation and implementation of new relief policies. Attention is concentrated upon ideas, the means by which they were implemented, and their legacy for the future. During the New Deal the theorists became men of action, the course of welfare history was changed, and the people were at least won halfway over. The heart of the matter is therefore the relationship between small groups working for change and the majorities voting their proposals up or down.

The history of relief during the New Deal began with hope for a national program to tackle poverty as a social disease. It ended with half measures: with a social security system that was neither generous nor comprehensive, a federal works program that was certain to be short-lived, and modest grants to supplement state care for those who were physically or mentally incapacitated. General relief was returned to the states and the treatment of poverty was often assigned to the smallest units of government, staffed by untrained officials administering a poor law that had not changed in essentials since the seventeenth century. These developments may have given new life to local self-government, but the fragmented character of public assistance has ruined all subsequent attempts to guarantee freedom from want.

This should not obscure the importance of what was done. After the experiment of federal relief, ideas that were unthinkable in 1930 became basic propositions in future debates. New concepts of social justice had taken root, and so rapid had been the change in national responsibility that contemporaries could hardly grasp its implications. In this as in so much else the depression and the New Deal meant that nothing would ever be the same again.